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THE OLD SOUTH DEFYING THE FLAMES.

THE STORY
OF
JUSTIN WINSOR,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
THE GREAT FIRE,

BOSTON, NOVEMBER 9-10, 1872,

By "CARLETON,"

AN EYE-WITNESS.

ILLUSTRATED BY BILLINGS,

FROM SKETCHES TAKEN ON THE SPOT.

BOSTON:
SHEPARD AND GILL.
1872.

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PREFACE.

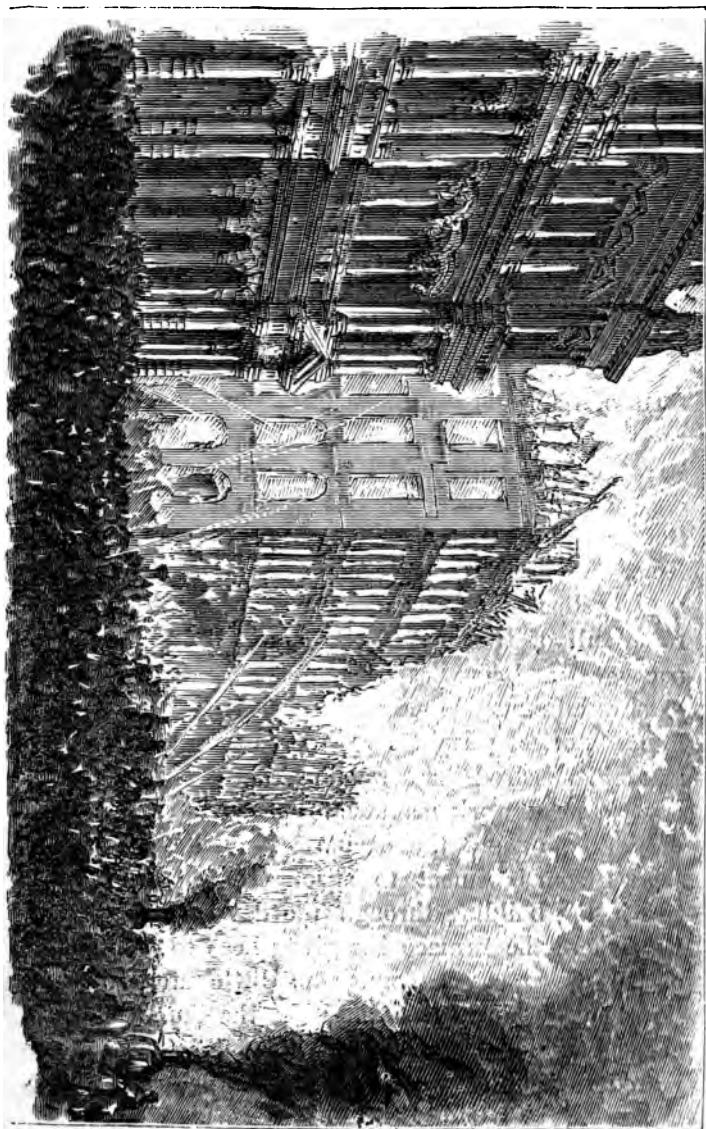
This story of the great fire is but a pen sketch. No one can be more sensible than myself of the feebleness of the attempt to set forth in words the scene of the night. The text is but a thread of narrative, written that the public may have the benefit of Mr. Billings's pencil. His pictures are accurate representations, and being such, are therefore historic. They are far more effectual than any words of mine can be to portray the indescribable grandeur of the conflagration.

CARLETON.

land, and of the chief manufacturing industries on this side of the Atlantic.

The energy and enterprise that has reared these structures has been felt all over the country. It has stopped rivers in their courses from the mountains to the seas, harnessed them to mill-wheels, and bade them work for the human race. It has reared towns by every waterfall, given employment to a vast multitude. It has cut up the rivers and ponds at the dead of winter, and transplanted them, piece-meal, to India, to cool the parched tongues of the dusky Hindoos. It has brought hides from the Ganges, from the pampas of Brazil, from the plains of Mexico, from the wilds of Australia, bark from the forests of Canada; has undertaken to make leather, to manufacture boots and shoes for the whole country; it weaves cloth by the hundred million yards; it does business to the amount of twelve hundred million dollars per annum; it has piled up a visible and taxable accumulated wealth of seven hundred million dollars, and an invisible capital of many hundred millions more!

How imposing beneath the moonlight! Granite, marble, brick and iron, — iron, marble, granite and brick, — so solid, so firm, that they will not reel or totter in the wildest war of elements; so secure that fire can never sweep them away; so safe that the merchant owning silks, and velvets, and laces, to the value of uncounted millions, is sitting in his easy-chair at home, confident that no calamity can come to him; that by no combination of circumstances will it



DEVONSHIRE STREET LOOKING SOUTH

be possible for his riches to take wings and fly away before the morrow's dawn.

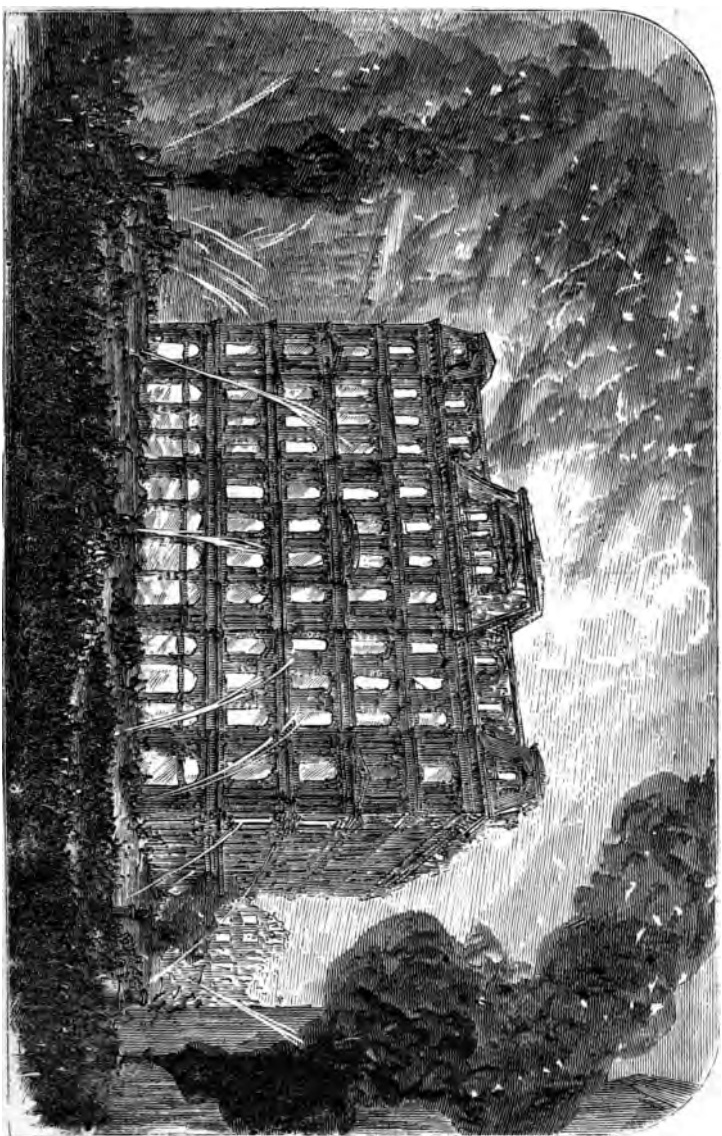
It is fifteen minutes past seven. I hear a booming of bells. Before the tones are flung out from belfry and steeple there is a sudden lighting up of the sky, an illumination of spires, a red glare on roofs and windows. People in Summer street,—the busy thoroughfare by day, the western boundary of this section of noble edifices,—are astonished by the bursting forth of flames in the upper stories of one of the tallest buildings. It is at the southern side of Summer street, at the corner of Kingston street. There are bales and boxes of dry goods in the basement and on the ground floor, reaching back from Summer street front one hundred feet or more. There are prints and muslins piled on counters ready for display,—a room full of tinder. In the stores above are cases, packages, and bundles of hosiery, gloves and laces,—more inflammable material,—and still higher, in the upper stories, piles of tape and muslin, thread and trimmings, shreds and ravelings, where sewing-girls have been at work manufacturing skirts and corsets. Tinder below and tinder above,—quick fuel for the flames from basement to attic. There has been no fire in the building through the day save in the cellar, where the furnace has given heat to the engine of the elevator. A spark, one little atom of fire, that may be pinched out between the thumb and finger, has kindled other sparks, or the builder who reared the edifice was careless, and nailed his laths

too near the furnace, forgetting that fire is hot, that wood dries, blackens, and easily burns, when all the sap has been dried from the pores.

Great events hang on little things. The builder, possibly, did not think that harm, disaster and calamity that would be felt in every mart of the world, in thousands of homes, that would bring despondency and sorrow to many hearts, could come from nailing a bit of board six inches nearer the boiler of the engine than it ought to have been. Or perhaps, the fireman did not see the one little speck of coal-dust that adhered to the poker when he withdrew it from the furnace, and set it in a corner near the basket of kindlings. Be it either of these, or something else, it is a little thing. But the mountain-spring becomes a river at last, the one spark a tornado of fire. The heated air ascends from floor to floor, fills the vast edifice, raising the temperature to the point of combustion, flashing into flame through all the upper portion of the building. The windows of the highest loft are quickly curtained with fire. Down come the engines from the north, from the centre of the city, from the south, drawn mostly by men and boys, who, out of pity for disabled horses, esteem it a pleasure to tug at the traces, as in former days, to shout and hurrah and grow wild with excitement and red in the face, as if shouting and excitement were indispensable to the putting out of fires, and the louder their voices the more effectual the effort. They started upon the run, but human muscles tire,

and when the ground changed from the level to an incline the run became a walk; but nearing the fire, catching a view of the lofty building, white with flames, they dart forward with deafening shouts, the perspiration oozing from every pore, wheel the engines up to the hydrants, uncoil long lines of hose, rear ladders against the walls, and begin the unequal battle,—unequal because the enemy is high above them, and has made such headway that though ten minutes have hardly passed it is plain it will be no ordinary contest between fire and water.

The fire leaps audaciously down from story to story as if saying to the firemen, “I have had my own way up there, I’ll see what I can do down here.” It takes hold of the laces, runs round the apartment in a twinkling, seizes the boxes and bales, licks the lathing from the walls, rattles the glass from the windows. The building is a furnace now, fed by currents of air sucked in through every opening, feeding the flames with rivers of oxygen. From basement to roof the fire rolls and surges, turning the stout timbers to glowing coals, whiffing out cases and their contents as if they were chips and rags. So intense is the heat that the firemen are driven from the streets, or are only able to reach the building with their streams of water, as they in turn are played upon by a fellow fireman, lying prone against the curbstone, in the gutter. Again and again the bells have sounded the alarm, and engines are hastening in to do battle at this critical moment, for the



WINTHROP SQUARE IN FLAMES.

cious structure. He tosses a brand into an upper window, and kindles fires all along the roof. It is so high from the ground that all efforts of the firemen to save it are futile. The giant may mock at their attempts to stop him and laugh at their helplessness.

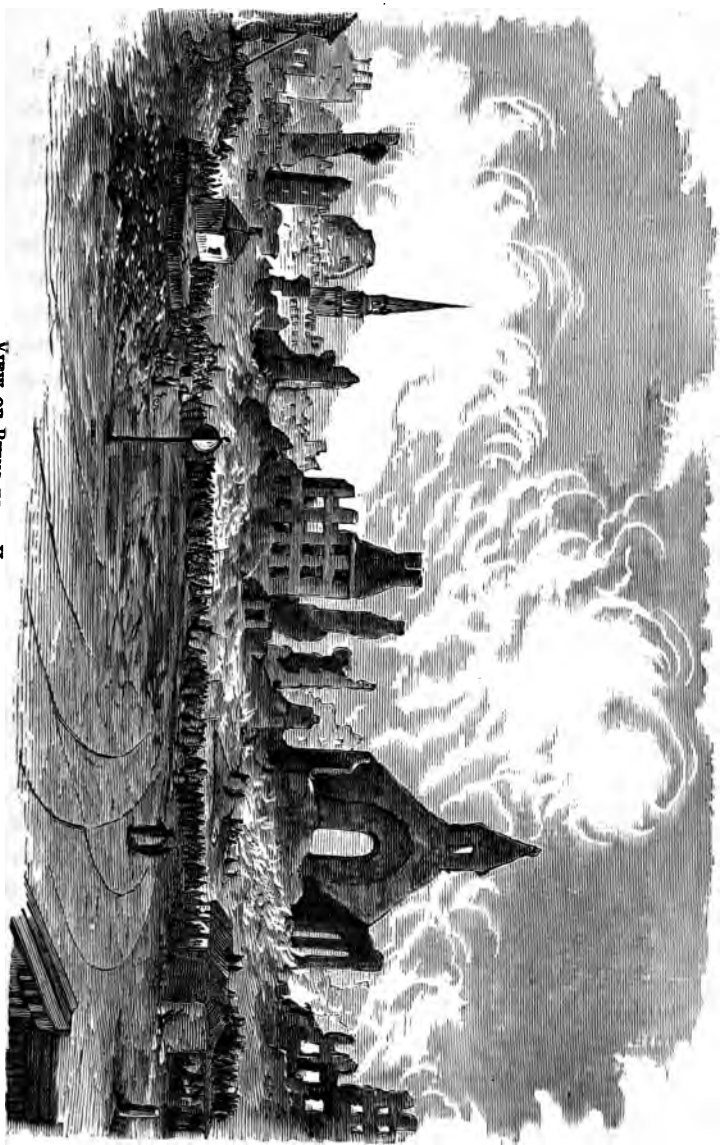
The conqueror devours it as if it were a delicious morsel. The fire leaps from every window, rolls down the spacious stairways in billows of flame, entwining the granite pillars, hanging in red folds beneath the cornice. The richest fabrics of European looms,—silks, velvets, satins, lace, and ribbons,—one hundred thousand dollars' worth a minute vanish in smoke and flame.

It may have been a half hour, perhaps an hour, for in battle one takes little note of time, and this structure, which has been the admiration of the citizens, the wonder of all visitors, so magnificent in all its proportions, so elaborate, so ornate, in pillar and pediment, in capital and cornice, is a flame from foundation to roof. Great is the fall of it! The earth trembles beneath the shock. A pillar of fire lifts itself for a moment far above all surrounding objects. In an hour the solid granite has been ground to powder and the great iron pillars have melted away. From the outset it has been evident that the destroyer will cut a path eastward to the water. No attempt is made to bar his progress in that direction. As steadily as a mower swinging his scythe in a green meadow, or a reaper in a harvest-field, the destroyer moves on.

But the battle is grandly maintained on the south. The firemen have learned the tactics of war, and attack the flank. There is the dividing line between the mart of trade and the houses of the poor. Already the inhabitants of the threatened section are leaving their homes. They are not rich in this world's goods,—a bed, table, a half dozen chairs, a few bundles, a little crockery,—but it is their fortune. It is not the landlord that hastens them to-night. No officer of the law, with writ of ejectment, ever tumbles beds or bedding, cooking stoves and crockery, looking-glasses and stew-pans, into the street as the owners are tumbling their effects to-night. Some of them have lost their senses in the whirl of excitement. They hurl a looking-glass from the upper story, and bring down with much care their feather beds in their arms. It is the old story repeated at every season of excitement. Men are tugging at a cooking stove, a woman hastens by with a rug in her arms, braided from old rags, more fit for the manure heap than for use on kitchen floor. A woman with the plaster image of the Virgin Mary in one hand, and a worn out wash-board in the other, hastens away with her treasures. In this hurrying scene two sons of Erin have a slight misunderstanding and box each other about the ears and blacken each the other's eyes, and then proceed to argue the question, while the cinders are falling around them. Women sit upon the door-steps and wring their hands. There was one who was selling laces, ribbons, needles and thread, and getting on in the world, but she is

penniless now. Her riches have flown away on fiery wings. The destroyer does not tarry a minute,—one swoop and all is gone. An old wooden building, standing on the corner of Lincoln and Summer streets, disappears as if it was a paste-board box.

The cinders, borne by the wind eastward, descend in showers upon the Hartford & Erie depot, at the foot of Summer street, and the coal-sheds along the wharves are quickly in flames. By ten o'clock the destroyer has cut a fiery swath to the harbor. He has swept over historic ground, the spot where once stood the mansion owned and occupied by Webster. What changes since he lived there! Quiet and retired was that locality at the junction of High and Summer streets. It was a comfortable house of ample dimensions. There was a front yard, there were elm and chestnut trees that shaded the streets all the way to Washington. How cool on the sultry days of mid-summer! How refreshing the sea-breeze that came in from the water, when the sun had gone down, rustling the leaves, and swaying the branches of the over-spreading trees! It was around him that the solid men of Boston lived. There was an air of strength, firmness, solidity, in the long line of mansions that graced both sides of the street. There was ease and comfort. But trade elbowed its way from Water and Milk streets in this direction. Ease and Comfort packed up their solid mahogany side-boards, their solid silver ware, their old-fashioned clocks, and moved over to the new Back Bay to rear new houses where



VIEW OF RUINS FROM HARTFORD AND ERIE DEPOT.

trade never would make an invasion. Never? It is a long time to the end of Never. It is hardly safe to predict what won't be. There is a great deal of room out West. We are forty millions to-day; we shall number one hundred millions twenty-eight years hence. Twenty-five years ago Webster was entertaining his friends on this spot where the fire is surging. Trade had only then begun to march in that direction. Twenty-five years ago, and Chicago was only a small Western town, knee deep in mud. When trade began to move westward from Milk street, Iowa was a mere state with two-thirds of its territory unsettled; and Minnesota, so near the North Pole as we thought it then, had but five thousand people in all her vast domain, and looked to Illinois for bread; but to-night Iowa has one hundred million bushels of corn and twenty-five millions of wheat in the market; Minnesota counts her population at six hundred thousand, and is sending to New England and Old England thirty million bushels of wheat. The first insurance money to be paid to those whose property is disappearing to-night will come from a sound and solid company at St. Paul. There is territory not yet settled for forty Minnesotas out West; and we shall go on, not only to one hundred millions, but in time,—and that time will be a long ways this side of Never,—to two hundred millions!

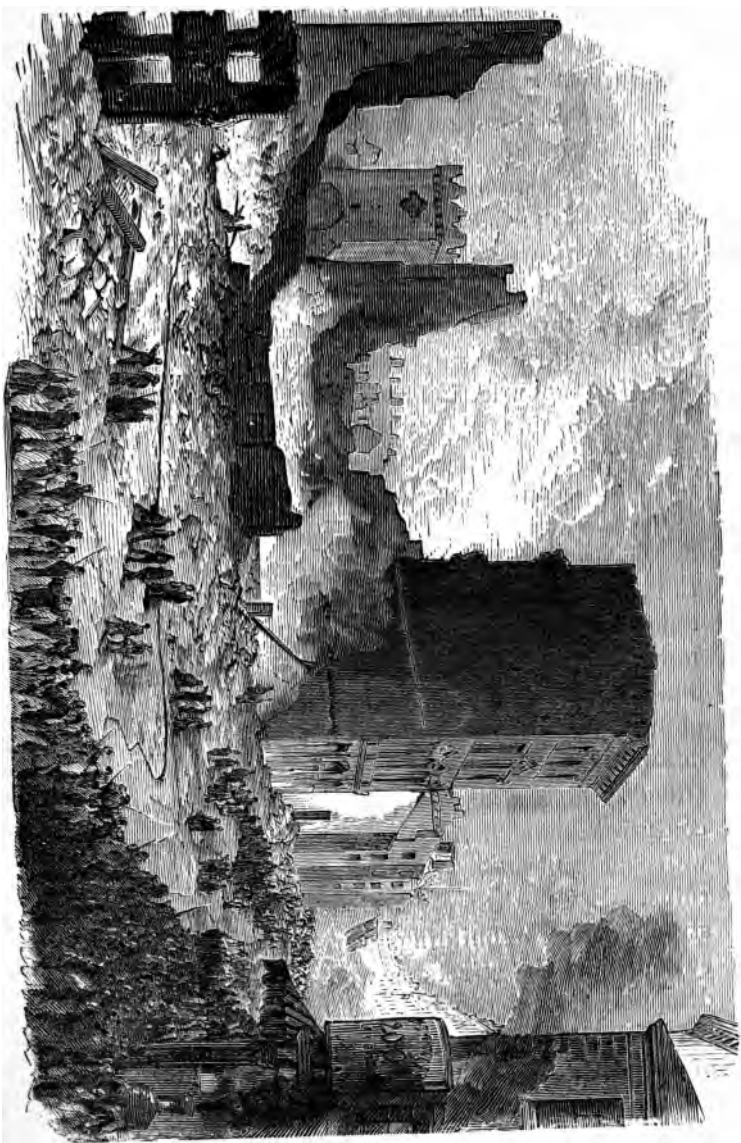
They are coming from everywhere. There is bread and work for all; and so America, in the eyes of the hungry millions of the world, is the land blessed above all others. Who shall make shoes for them? Who

weave cloth? Pearl street, throughout its entire length, is a surging mass of flame at this hour; the great shoe and leather houses in the city are in flames, but they will be re-built, and trade will take up its line of march towards the south, the north, and the west ends of the city. There is no knowing what it will do to the Back Bay, for Boston is the centre of a line of industry.

The fire has been edging its way westward against the wind. It sweeps over the spot where Everett lived and died. It makes more rapid progress northward, over the spot where Rufus Choate, in his quiet and cultured home, pondered the intricacies of the law. Westward to Trinity the fire-fiend gradually works his way. Its stones are massive, its walls strong as those of a fortress; but the destroyer enters by the windows, twines his wreaths of flame around the pillars that support the groined roof, rains showers of glowing coals upon carpet, cushion and hassock, melts the pipes of the sweet-toned organ, brings down rafters and beams and roof all together, and passes on towards Washington street, leaving the massive stones still standing, a picturesque and stately ruin. The enemy has driven the firemen back step by step, and now the line of battle is along Washington street. They stand as the Union soldiers stood on Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg. If the enemy passes the ridge, if the destroyer passes Washington street, there is no knowing where he will stop. To lose this line of defence is to lose all. Brave the conflict! Engines can be spared from the southern flank,

and they are brought round to the front. Reinforcements have come from all the surrounding towns and cities,—men who have seen the light flaming against the midnight sky, growing wider, broader and higher. It flames so high that it becomes a beacon-light to mariners three hundred miles away ; so bright that it gilds, not only the dome of the State House, and surrounding spires, but lights up the Blue Hills of Milton. Sixty miles distant upon the New Hampshire hills a mother, watching a sick one through the anxious night, beholds the southern horizon all aglow, and men harness their teams in haste to ride to the fire, thinking it near at hand. From midnight till morning the area of flame is widening westward, eastward and northward. The firemen turn the flank of the enemy at the corner of Summer and Washington streets. They make a brave fight for the building occupied by the American Watch Company, and win the victory. But from that point along Washington to Franklin, from Franklin to Milk, to the Transcript office, one door south of Milk, there is nothing but ruins.

Six o'clock Sunday morning.—The day is dawning, but it is lighter than midday all around the Old South. From press room to attic the lofty Transcript building is aglow. All the buildings on Franklin and Milk street have disappeared. The fiery billows have rolled over the spot where Franklin was born. They have dashed up to the new post office, still unfinished and constructed of indestructible materials. It is a break-fire on this Sunday morning.

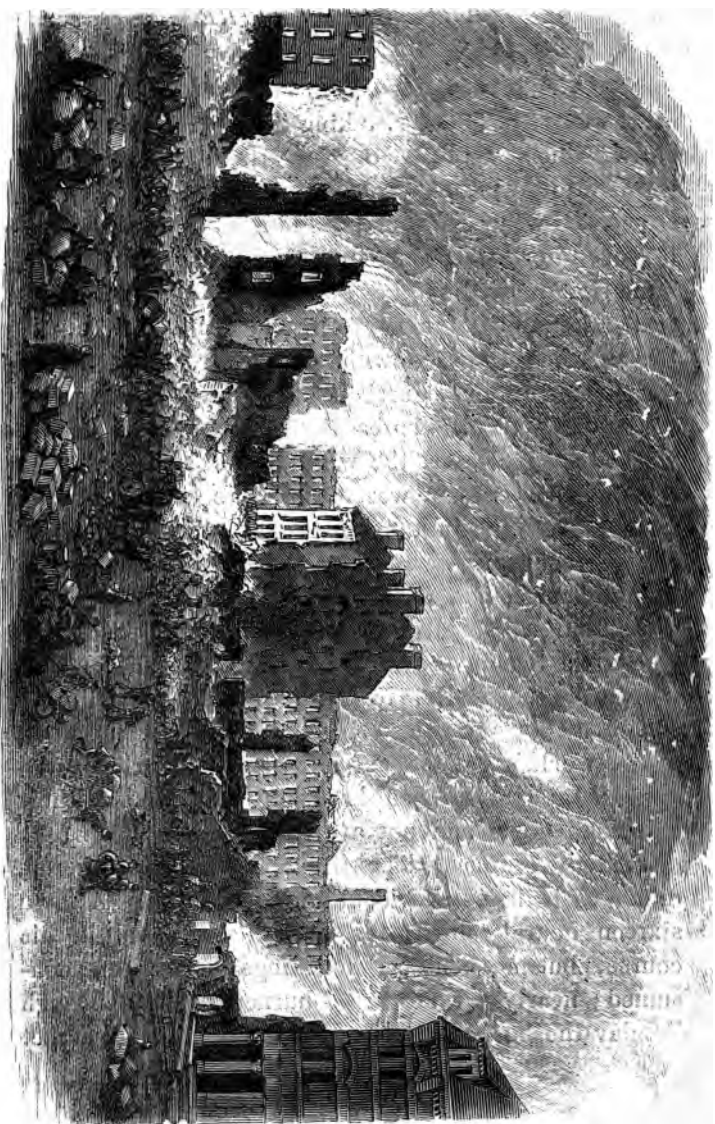


VIEW OF RUINS ON WASHINGTON STREET.

The waves roll round it, dash past it, almost encircle it, leap round it across Water street, as if to overwhelm and sweep away the treasures stored in the banks of State street. The post office and the sub-treasury take refuge in the Custom House. It is a fierce battle waged by a score of engines through the early hours of Sunday morning. Men who have worked all night drop exhausted on the pavement, but volunteers take their places. Refreshments are brought round, gunpowder is brought into play, explosion follows explosion, and a flood of water poured from every available place. The fire long ago burned itself out on Purchase street, east and north of Summer, by sweeping away every building between Summer and the open space made by the cutting down of Fort Hill. It is still working its way northeast toward the Custom House, past Liberty square, but the buildings are lower and the firemen can reach the topmost stories. The rising sun shines through a black and heavy pall of smoke and looks down upon a wide-spread scene of desolation. The streets of the burned district are so filled with granite, marble and brick, piled in chaotic confusion, and there is such a wilderness of broken walls and chimneys, that we have been lost amid the ruins. It was difficult to find one's way through the streets when the buildings were standing in their glory, but now the streets as well as the buildings have disappeared.

But daylight has come and we can trace the outlines of the streets. Commencing where the fire began we

VIEW OF THE FIRE FROM FORT HILL. .



can see how it moved,—down Summer street eastward all the way to the water, taking every building on both sides of the street. At the same time it moved northward into Winthrop square and westward to Otis street. Having consumed the buildings on the square it moved northward once more to Franklin, and at the same time mowed another swath eastward across Federal, High and Congress, to Pearl street. The line of fire that had passed down Summer street, meanwhile turned north along Purchase and Broad, toward Oliver street. While spreading in these directions it worked itself against the wind, and in spite of the efforts of the firemen, westward across Otis, Arch and Hawley, to Washington, northwest across Franklin, along Devonshire and Federal, to Milk, to the Old South Church and the new Post Office, along Congress, and across Milk and Water, Lindall and Central, to the rear of the old Post Office, spreading north-eastward, the while, to Kilby street and Liberty square.

The world's greatest shoe and leather mart has disappeared. It has been hard for men to see their stores go down and not a drop of water thrown to quench the flames. The firemen were otherwheres, doing their best, and could not be there. After a sixteen hours' conflict the enemy is arrested in his course, but a thousand buildings have been consumed; nearly seventy acres burned over. Through Friday the burned area is a sea of flame and smoke.

From all the city, all the surrounding towns, men and women come to see the desolation. It seems like war-times. There is the drum-beat and the tramping of soldiers in the street, and the gleam of



WASHINGTON STREET LOOKING SOUTH.

the sun and fire on barrel and bayonet. When the fire was at its height the marines came from the Navy Yard, and now they are joined by the militia to protect property from plunderers. The Common is piled with goods. Merchandise by the million dollars' worth

is piled in the streets and on the public grounds, and there are thousands in the crowd who would like to be thought honest who have not hesitated to plunder their fellow men in the hour of their misfortune.

One hundred millions, more or less, of accumulated wealth has been swept away. What did it represent? Was it so many dollars only,—so much gold and silver or greenbacks? It was the accumulation of honest toil of days and nights, weeks, months and years. It was industry backed by a purpose,—not only to accumulate but to bless. There were endowments for colleges, schools, hospitals and churches, in those millions. Harvard College alone is at least a quarter of a million poorer on this Sunday noon than she was at seven P. M. last night. Beneficiaries that would have received bountifully must go with empty purses awhile. What a disarrangement of plans there has been during these sixteen hours! Men were going to give of their abundance. When the New Year came round they would make somebody's heart glad, but now when the contribution boxes are passed for the collection of gifts they will only give of their poverty. Ah! but those two mites which the poor woman dropped was more than all the other contributions to the Lord's treasury. Men were going to Europe, now they will stay at home. They were going to give a grand party, by-and-by, but it will not be given. Sons and daughters at school possibly will be called home.

Sunday at midnight. There comes an unheralded explosion heard throughout the city, that startles the people from their slumbers. The gas escaping from broken pipes near where the fire first kindled has exploded, and instantly the surrounding buildings are in flames. The alarm once more rings out from belfry and steeple. The engines hasten to where the battle first began, but not till the flames have swept Summer street clean to Washington street on its southern side, with the exception of two buildings, are they extinguished. Fully a million dollars has been added to the sum total of loss by this little outburst of flame. It would be great if it were a conflagration by itself, but when compared with the greater destruction it is hardly to be mentioned.

Life has gone out as well as property. Men have been crushed by falling walls while trying to save property; firemen have been overtaken by the flames while doing their duty. Men will be missing and friends will speak of them as having been swallowed up in the great fire. It will be remembered as the great fire, the greatest that America has seen, with the exception of that which laid waste Chicago. New entries will be made in the journals of business men, in the community and in the family; they will date back to the great fire. It will be a turning point in mens' lives; a starting point. To a great many it will be a start from the bottom of the ladder. They must go over again all the hard struggles, fight the

great battles, meet and conquer difficulties. They were going to take things easy the remainder of life. Gray hairs have come in fighting the battles of the past. The brain tires, the limbs grow weary, the hands hang down as they did not in former years. It is hard to think of it. There is a choking in the throat. And if now and then a tear starts unbidden to the eye, who will not respect it? There is manliness in tears. The man is to be pitied who cannot weep at his own or at others' misfortunes. But the men who reared those structures now consumed are not of those who wring their hands and make loud lamentations over disaster. How calmly they gaze upon the ruin! With what clearness they look at the future! How prompt to plan, how quick to execute! While the spot is still an abyss of flame and smoke they are contracting for new edifices that shall be more substantial, more palatial than those that have crumbled to dust and ashes. The brick makers of Somerville have their orders, the quarrymen of Concord are already at work, and architects are drawing their plans. Flocks and herds will not crop grass in Milk street; fire weeds will not have time to grow in Winthrop square. Stone cutters and brick layers will be busy the coming season, and the tide of traffic will still roll on in undiminished but ever-increasing volume. Men are beginning to see that Boston has a bright future before her; that she is to be more than ever the commercial centre of

the great industrial hive; that once more her harbor is to be white with arriving and departing sails; that fleets of steamers are to furrow the waters of the Bay. To these wharves they will bring the raw materials of every land: hides, wool, gums and dyes, and all articles used in industries. This shall be more than ever a gateway of the continent. Is it not a day's sail nearer Europe than New York to the seaports of the other side of the Atlantic? A day's sail and the coal fields of Lancashire, the source of the motive force in England, have transferred the shipping that formerly choked the Thames, to Liverpool. A day's sail has made Liverpool the world's greatest seaport. Who knows what a day's sail may not do by and by for Boston? She will reach out her hands to the grain fields of the West, and bring the rich harvest of the prairies to her wharves and send it abroad for the hungry millions of England. Through the haze and smoke of Monday morning, the merchants of Boston can see the waste places rebuilt and the new Boston spreading out over all the green hills that surround it. As the new vegetation springs rank and green from the ashes of the old forest, so shall the future be bright with blossoms. But sweetest and most fragrant is the flower, that, while the flames are raging, unfolds its blossom in city and town and hamlet,—loveliest flower of the celestial graces,—charity. The world presses its benefactions upon us. The telegraph makes us neighbors. Chris-

tianity has made us brothers. The whole human race is our kin; and while the fire burns, this one call comes to us from the prairies, from beyond the Sierra Nevadas, and from across the Atlantic, "What can we do for you?" It is the anthem following the hymn sung by the angels of Bethlehem, "Good will to men," and it is the best part of the story of the Great Fire.

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